

Memory, Religion, and Authoritarianism in Post (1994)-Genocide Rwanda

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Abstract

This article attempts to theorise governmental efforts of the Kagame regime to construct a common national identity that precariously hinges on the adoption of an official revisionist history. Guided by Jan Assmann's theory of cultural memory and Maurice Halbwachs' collective memory, it may be argued the government's official narrative of Rwanda's idyllic history is a strategy for securing Rwanda's future by linking it to an ancestral past. This narrative is largely supported by museums and the frozen memories of Tutsi returnees — to the exclusion of competing narratives — as materialised and *publicly* disseminated through traditional dances and tandemly pursued through *private* spaces through infiltration and closure of churches and mosques. However, per Rebekah Phillips *DeZalia*, a new version of history must successfully replace the former in the personal narratives of the people and not simply control public discourse through a top-down approach. Hence, the Kagame regime is also utilising a bottom-up strategy of infiltrating day-to-day, intimate spaces — one of which is religious spaces by both exploiting and curbing religious influence, appropriating religious language, and referencing the divine right of kings — all which are designed to sustain public confidence in the possibility of post-1994 genocide reconciliation and to realise Kagame's vision of a unified and prosperous Rwanda. The regime's strategy involves inverting the overall passage of personal memory to collective memory to history as well as repressing memory in official memorials by excluding narratives that contradict or do not legitimise the Kagame regime's agenda. This tandem manipulation and suppression of memory is aided by the aggressive campaign of church and mosque infiltrations as well as closures, respectively, which may be functionally understood using Thomas Luckmann's notions of invisible religion (Rwandan government) as competing with visible religions (Christianity and Islam). These government strategies are detrimental to the trauma-coping potential of visible religions and undermines reconciliation — highlighting the fragile architecture of Kagame's authoritarian vision for peace.

Keywords

authoritarianism, collective memory, cultural memory, religion, trauma, Rwanda

Introduction

In late September 2023, Rwanda's President and former leader of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) Paul Kagame, announced that he would run for a fourth presidential term. Made possible by a successful 2015 referendum that lifted term limits, he will be able to rule until 2034 if he wins the next two elections — a possibility that is both welcomed and feared by Rwandans and particularly condemned by Western nations (Ssuuna & Anna, 2023). Despite being a signatory to several human

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rights instruments, Rwanda is characterized as “not free” by Freedom House (n.d.), a non-profit organization in Washington, DC that assesses countries’ human rights records. Kagame is widely credited for Rwanda’s stability post the 1994 genocide — particularly the country’s economic and technological growth — but his brutal intolerance of political dissent, promulgation of a revisionist history of Rwanda, and shuddering of churches and mosques have garnered extensive criticism. This mixed and complicated portrait of Kagame is perhaps best summarised as one among the “good kings, bloody tyrants, and everything in between” of Rwanda, which is the title of an article that exposes the chasm among its citizens concerning their view of their historical past and monarchy (mostly in private spaces) as informed by their lived experiences, political affiliations, and identities (Jessee & Watkins, 2015, p. 35).

These vastly contrasting views expose “the current political climate in post-genocide Rwanda [...] and the enormous challenges facing the Rwandan government as it seeks to reconcile its population [to the official narrative of Rwandan history] using current methods” (Jessee & Watkins, 2015, p. 35). Among these methods are the (less-examined) dance performances (Plancke, 2017) and the more commonly researched mechanisms of “public discourse, educational reform, memorials and commemorations, and trials” that the regime utilises “to [promote] a narrative of the past that [highlights] the genocide as the central point of Rwandan history and [portrays] the RPF as the heroes who had stopped the genocide and... [are] now unifying and transforming the country” (Longman, 2018, p. 63). Many important works examine the privileging of some narratives and elision of others by the state in public, official memorialisations of the 1994 genocide. This article also treats this topic but also seeks to explore how the Kagame regime attempts to manipulate the process of collective memory-making among its citizenry by theorising governmental efforts to construct a common national identity that precariously hinges on the adoption of an official revisionist history. Guided by Jan Assmann’s theory of collective memory and Maurice Halbwachs’ cultural memory, it may be argued the Kagame regime’s official narrative is a strategy for securing Rwanda’s future by linking it to an ancestral past and is largely supported by what will be referred to as the *frozen memories* of Tutsi returnees — materialised and *publicly* disseminated (for domestic and international audiences) through traditional dances — and tandemly pursued in *private* spaces through infiltration and closure of churches and mosques.

Tutsi *rapatriés*’ (most refugees were from Uganda, Tanzania, Kenya, Congo [Zaire] and Burundi) are subsumed under the category of “survivors” by virtue of “emphasising the long-term persecution of Tutsi dating to 1959”; their collective memory of a utopian Rwanda dominates post-genocide Rwanda and is integral to sustaining the official, government narrative and historical perspective (King, 2010, p. 298). This underpins a pure cultural memory that promotes an idyllic Rwandan past — as manifest in state rituals — that emphasises a common Rwandan ancestry and eschews the colonial, ethnic identities of Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa that instigated the genocide in order to sustain public confidence in post-1994 genocide reconciliation and to realise Kagame’s vision of a unified and prosperous Rwanda. However, a new version of history must successfully replace the former in the personal narratives of the people and not simply control public discourse through a top-down approach (DeZalia, 2006, p. 159). Hence, the government is also utilising a bottom-up strategy of infiltrating day-to-day, intimate spaces — one of which is religious spaces.

Despite the complicity of churches in the 1994 genocide, over 90% of Rwandans are Christians. However, their affiliation has shifted from Catholicism to Pentecostalism, primarily because of the support of and participation in the genocide by Rwandan Catholic Churches (some of which were the sites of massacres). It is also the case that Pentecostalism was the religion adopted by many returnees in their host countries (Longman, 2018, p. 61). Kagame loosened the prior regime’s restrictions on religious organisations, which resulted in a proliferation of churches and would, at first, enlist religious groups in his reconciliation efforts — many of which Timothy Longman criticised for perpetuating a dangerous and “too cozy” of a relationship with the state that promoted “ethnic politics”; not to mention, being embroiled in political struggles of its own (Longman, 2018, pp. 71–72) — only to later selectively close houses of worship and have pastors arrested in 2018 that Kagame believed threatened his vision for Rwanda by imposing training, noise, and infrastructure restrictions (Grant, 2020; Markoe, 2018; Longman, 2018, pp. 59–61). This, while still co-opting religious language and attempting to leverage the historical and persisting influence of religion in Rwandan society, Kagame’s three-fold strategy regarding religion appears to be to discredit and close thousands of churches and mosques but maintain control of the private space and discourse attendance affords by dictating the parameters of their reopening and

maintenance as well as strategically referencing the moral force of religion and exploiting a Rwandan, ancestral belief in the divine right of kings — all of which contribute to the Kagame regime acting as an invisible religion. Furthermore, “for Maurice Halbwachs, there is a symmetry between the passage from (1) personal to (2) collective memory and that from collective memory to (3) history” (Stroumsa, 2016, pp. 333). This passage does not unfold in entirely discrete stages nor are personal memories formed outside of a social context, but it does roughly capture the common-sense order of how communities curate and confer a status upon memories over time. Halbwachs’ model is useful in examining the Rwandan case as the Kagame regime is largely inverting this roughly linear symmetry — revising (3) history as a basis for a (2) collective memory manifest in cultural memory with the aim of collective memory eventually replacing (1) personal memory — an inversion that may point to the fragility of Rwanda’s purported, successful reconciliation efforts.

Another point of fragility not only lies in a revisionist history of Rwanda’s past, but a selective future as dictated by stilted memorialisations that exclude narratives perceived to conflict with the government’s agenda; hence, the appeal and privileging of the frozen memories of Tutsi returnees/survivors and their affection for the monarchy to the regime. A governmental practice of memory exclusion, coupled with curbing through closures the crucial ability of religious institutions to attend to traumatized communities, contravenes the social and individual healing that is crucial to successful and lasting peace (King, 2010; Clark, 2013) in addition to the particularly powerful role that religion can play in the process of coping with trauma (Pargament, 2011). Further, Jeffrey C. Alexander and Neil J. Smelser elucidate this dynamic of exclusion and trauma and its impediment to reconciliation through their concept of *cultural trauma*. According to Alexander and Smelser, communities construct “cultural trauma” in response to an experience so grave and unforgettable that it fundamentally alters their future identity for all time (Alexander et al., 2004, p. 1). Applied to the Kagame regime case, the government’s refusal largely to recognise narratives that do not support its aims — such as those of moderate Hutus who resisted genocide — “den[ies] the reality of others’ suffering ... and “restrict[s] solidarity” (Alexander et al., 2004, p. 1). This failure to support a “circle of the we” renders the government’s tactics ineffectual as a tool for psychological healing as well as for reconciliation (Alexander et al., 2004, p. 1) — the very aim that the government’s revisionist history of the persisting oneness of all Rwandans is designed to promote.

The Frozen Memories of Returnees

Tutsi refugees, who fled Hutu uprisings in 1959 and 1973 and returned to Rwanda after the RPF ended the 1994 genocide, number one million — nearly double the number of Tutsi who were massacred during the atrocity and is the segment of the population that has most prospered under Kagame’s rule (Longman & Rutagengwa, 2006, p. 140; Longman, 2018, p. 70; Desrosiers & Thomson 2011, pp. 433–434). Tutsi who directly experienced the 1994 genocide are typically viewed as the “most authentic bearers of truth” (King, 2010, p. 295), and these victims, combined with repatriated refugees, are corporately recognised as “survivors” by the state (King, 2010, p. 295). Yet, the historical narrative of returnees, whose collective memory of a utopian Rwanda was incubated abroad (Longman & Rutagengwa, 2006, p. 45), dominates post-genocide, official memorials and is integral to sustaining a government narrative. The official government account of Rwanda’s history (which provides a framework for remembering the genocide and promoting reconciliation) is a revisionist history of Rwandan as free of contentious divisions among Tutsi, Hutu, and Twa. An idealised Rwandan past is a period of peaceful existence among socially differentiated Rwandans with a common ancestry that preceded the pernicious, colonial influence that bitterly divided Tutsi, Hutu, and Twa among the ethnic lines that fomented the 1994 genocide.

The idyllic pre-colonial Rwanda and affection for the Tutsi monarchy that shapes the returnee imagination (and is not shared by survivors who were on the ground during the genocide) (Jessee, 2017, p. 191) is largely due to a process of romanticisation afforded by geographic distance and the influence of national genocide memorial sites that aim to “educate returned Rwandan refugees” (Dickson, 2017). As nearly all the former exiles are descendants of monarchs who fled during the First Hutu Republic, they “grew up hearing stories of benevolent kings and an idyllic life (...) and [longed] to return to Rwanda, [a nostalgia that translates to] loyalty to Kagame and the RPF” (Jessee, 2017, p. 191). Moreover, while those who directly experienced the genocide tend to favour private “memorialisation as an end in itself, others, especially some Tutsi elites who returned from exile, conceive of memorialisation as a means to an end, notably the marketing of genocide” (Meierhenrich, 2010). This promotion reinforces a mythos that is integral to the

conservation of a product of cultural memory, memorials, and cultural activities, such as dance performances, that perpetuate the regime's desired historical narrative. The frozen in time recollection of returnees is indispensable to Kagame's maintenance of pure cultural memory, or the reproduction of a sacralised Rwandan past, which Kagame uses to rule and sustain public confidence in reconciliation and realisation of a unified Rwanda. Interestingly, and perhaps yet a further illustration of the importance of religion in Rwandan society, Kagame characterised the country's level of commitment to a unified Rwanda at a 2019 Young Presidents' Organisation Delegation thusly: "We are convinced what we have had in our [colonial] past is not what we deserve, what we deserve is in our future. We all go together and we don't want to leave anyone behind; that is more or less like a religion for us..." (Tashobya, 2018).

Collective Memory

Maurice Halbwachs asserts that "in all societies, religion is an essentially conservative social phenomenon, which seeks to preserve, through time, the ... pure memory of an ancient past," that is less preserved than reconstructed (Halbwachs, 1925, p. 193, quoted in Stroumsa, 2016, p. 333). Moreover, for Halbwachs, there is a symmetry between the passage from personal to collective memory and that from collective memory to history" (Halbwachs, 1925, p. 193). Jan Assmann's notion of *cultural memory*, a parsing of Halbwachs' *collective memory*, entails that memory encompasses social, historical, and mythical time, and is symbolised through stable objects of collective memory transmission or culture, a mode of collective memory of which Halbwachs was not concerned (Assmann, 2008, p. 110). It may be argued that Kagame cultivates a revised Rwandan ancestral past through the conservation of reconstituted mythologies of pure origins via the mechanism of cultural memory as transmitted through art performances and religious spaces.

This revisionist history is particularly essential given the central role that history plays in Rwandan popular consciousness; per Alison DesForges, "Rwandans take history seriously" (DeZalia, 2006, p. 159). In Kagame's strategy, the official narrative has to dominate not only national, public discourse through the cultivation of cultural memory but also personal, intimate discourse (DeZalia, 2006, p. 159), the latter of which is constitutive of religious or worship service circles. This makes Rwanda an interesting case study, because "while there is a plethora of studies of collective memory, the relationship between the personal and the collective dimension of memory remains strikingly understudied" (Stroumsa, 2016, p. 333). Perhaps Halbwachs' religious memory combined with Assmann's cultural memory enables such a study.

The degree to which the Kagame's government interventions mitigate the psychological damage of genocide is not a foundation or a driving aim of the regime. Rather, it appears that the success of Kagame's campaign not only relies on the foundational, frozen memories of repatriated Tutsi but also on all Rwandans adopting the official narrative as their own personal narrative. "For Halbwachs, there is a symmetry between the passage from personal to collective memory and that from collective memory to history" (Stroumsa, 2016, p. 333). In the Rwandan case, it appears that the Kagame regime is inverting this symmetry — revising history as a basis for collective memory, that elides into personal memory. The "pure memory of an ancient" past promulgated by the state is once a singular Rwandan ancestry, recasting and minimizing the Hutu, Tutsi, Twa distinction established by the Hamitic myth. Today, the RFP decries any division among the three groups as based on ethnicity and instead insists on transitional identities based on "production" and "basic modes of subsistence" as distinguishing the groups from one another (Hutu as agrarian, Tutsi as cattle herders, and Twa as hunter gatherers) (DeZalia, 2006, p. 159). These trivial differences in social standing are, however, eclipsed by the unity of all three as ancestral Rwandans who intermarry and share the same language and culture. This theory, commonly referred to as the Social Constructivist Narrative or Pro-Tutsi/RPF version, in literature), is most common among the Tutsi raised in exile (DeZalia, 2006, p. 163–164) and "when Tutsi in the diaspora returned to Rwanda, they brought this emphasis on being Rwandan, not Tutsi or Hutu, with them" (DeZalia, 2006, p. 165); for example, "Tutsi refugees in Uganda came to see themselves as Banyarwanda (Rwandese), and not as Tutsi" (DeZalia, 2016, p. 165).

Collective and Cultural Memory

Jan Assmann (2008) writes that:

Cultural memory reaches back into the past only so far as the past can be reclaimed as "ours". This is why we refer to this form

of historical consciousness as “memory” and not just as knowledge about the past. Knowledge about the past acquires the properties and functions of memory if it is related to a concept of identity. While knowledge has no form and is endlessly progressive, memory involves forgetting. It is only by forgetting what lies outside the horizon of the relevant that it performs an identity function. (p. 113)

The Social Constructivist Narrative of a unified Banyarwandan identity involves strategic forgetting but it also involves the construction of “stable objects” of collective memory, and the RPF “reaches back into the past” (Assmann, 2008, p. 113) to reclaim a common Rwandan, pre-colonial history in order to forge a new collective memory — a memory nurtured by habituation. Two such cultural objects are genocide memorials and dance performances, both of which integrally involve the memories of *rapatriés*. Given the lack of formal education and Rwandan resistance to official narratives, genocide memorials are not the best approach to catalysing the internalisation of the RPF’s message of a common Rwandese identity. “Average Rwandans rarely visit the sites; the local communities avoid them [so who visits the sites?] foreigners and repatriated Tutsi” (Longman, 2017, p. 88). Nonetheless, the mutually reinforcing memories of returnees and message of genocide memorials is crucial to the maintenance of pre-colonial mythology, especially given that repatriated Tutsi are disproportionately occupying influential positions in Rwandan society (Jessee, 2017, p. 189).

Reaching even further back into the past, Michela Wong makes a keen observation that weaves together the dual personas of Kagame, the role museums play in bridging the past and present, and that supports a claim herein that Kagame is not only engaged in the dual strategy of curbing and infiltrating the influence of organised religions but is also exploiting Rwandan religious and cosmological beliefs, in this case, by telegraphing the divine sanctioning of his presidency to the Rwandan citizenry:

[T]he King’s Palace in Nyanza, southwest of Kigali, commemorates Rwanda’s centuries-old Tutsi monarchy, the king of which was called the *mwami*. The Modernist palace was built by the Belgians for the 1931 enthronement of Mutara III Rudahigwa — an ancestor of Kagame (...) Next door to the palace, the government has erected a replica of the giant rondavel that the *mwami* inhabited (...) The traditional round mud hut with a thatched roof speaks of court ritual, dynastic legitimacy, and ancient bloodlines; it is a memento of days when leaders were chosen by God, not voters (...)

Rwanda’s two types of museums could be said to represent the paradox that is Kagame. The country’s recovery from one of the 20th century’s most grotesque massacres once seemed all but impossible. The Kigali Genocide Memorial and other sites dedicated to that 1994 tragedy underline the image ... of a benign technocrat who rebuilt a traumatised state and miraculously delivered peace, stability, and economic growth rates routinely exceeding 5 percent each year. The newer museums point instead to an iron-willed strongman consolidating indefinite rule. From the latter vantage point, the message projected by the King’s Palace since it opened nearly eight years ago — perhaps the most sinister message of those delivered by Rwanda’s memorials — is surely intended for Kagame’s constituents: *I am the new mwami*, it seems to declare (Wrong, 2016).

Further evidence of Kagame’s intention to shore-up his credibility by linking his government and the divine while simultaneously casting doubt on the credibility of organized

religion can be found in claims he made at the 23rd annual special prayer breakfast with the theme *Transformative Leadership*:

The President particularly reminded those present that “Rwanda cannot be people who need to be taught values continuously (...) Instilling godly values in leadership means those values have to be part of who we are (...)”; [he] also warned that Religion should not be seen as an anaesthetic that allows one to be numb to the hard challenges one must face. (IGIHE, 2019)

The marketing of a unified culture is also promoted through neo-traditional artistic expression (a phrase meant to capture Halbwachs’ sentiment of not preserving but reconstructing origins) or more specifically, dance. Dance is singled out because it is explicitly mentioned in the government program of economic and technological advancement: “In the ‘Vision 2020,’ culture is considered a positive resource for the new Rwanda (...); [to this end], the government has revitalized precolonial practices and has even reinvented some” (Plancke, 2017, p. 2). “Thanks to dance’s position as a positive identity marker, it is now part of the newly created ceremonies in addition to comprising an obligatory element of most official ceremonies (ibid) (...) [and] is driven by urban Tutsi returnees” (Plancke, 2017, p. 3).

Inganzo Ngari, [which translates to *large creation*] is a mixed youth troupe of Tutsi refugees originating from Burundi and Congo and dancers from Rwanda (Plancke, 2017, p. 5–6). The troupe’s repertoire is characterised by a collapse of regional differences and an amalgam of innovative styling and tradition, including dress, traditional gestures, “like the lateral swaying of the sternum accompanied by an arm movement which alternates between an extended and a relaxed position” (Plancke, 2017, p. 7) with popular dance movements. The troupe’s performances epitomise the primary goal of *Vision 2020*: “Rwanda will become a modern, united and prosperous nation, founded on the positive values of its culture” (MINECOFIN, 2000, p. 14, quoted in Plancke, 2017, p. 9). This pure culture memory promotes an idyllic Rwandan past — as manifest in state rituals, memorials, and dance performances — that emphasises a common Rwandan ancestry and eschews the rigid, colonial, ethnic identities of Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa that instigated the genocide. The frozen memories of Tutsi *rapatriés* — whose affection for the Tutsi monarchy and a utopian history developed within the romanticised context of nostalgia afforded by geographic distance — are critical to maintaining this revisionist past. As the regime seeks to preserve a reconstituted origin myth of Rwandans, the success seems dependent upon quashing the discourse of these intimate spaces and interjecting the national narrative with the goal of the personal adoption of the official narrative (a task made easier by the romantic memories of Tutsi returnees), but also upon discrediting religious institutions as a rival reservoir of influence in Rwandan history and contemporary life (a task made easier by the complicity of churches in the 1994 Rwandan genocide and the cover of law). Perhaps no observable action by the government more clearly demonstrates these goals than carefully choreographed memorials and public dances and the March 2018 mass closure of approximately 1,500 churches and mosques for non-compliance with building and noise regulations (BBC, 2018).

Church Closures and Religion

While to some “he [Kagame] is a savior, nearly messianic in his mission and vision, who has single-handedly delivered the nation out of hell on earth..., [to others] he is a heavy-handed tyrant, accused of acting like a dictator who silences the opposition” (Crisafulli & Redmond, 2012, p. 6). Although this opposition is most often associated with political dissenters, it is also clear that he construes some organised religion and religious leaders as threatening to his regime, too, but only under certain circumstances and during different periods of his presidency. Soon after the quelling of genocidal violence, Christian Churches and mosques assisted in Rwandans coping with trauma, memorialising the dead, and promoting reconciliation and forgiveness (Longman, 2018, pp. 66, 72–73); this was embraced by Kagame to the extent that it furthered his agenda to solidify support for the official narrative of the genocide (aided by appointing pastors who supported the RPF) and advanced his vision for Rwanda, but were increasingly silenced if “they were leading the country down the ‘wrong’ development path, imagining a ‘wrong’ kind of future” (Grant, 2020, p. 174), which is why it is not coincidental that most of the closes churches have been Pentecostal, “which might have something to do with Rwanda’s open secret: the country’s religious

denominations are expected to pledge loyalty to the government of long-time President Paul Kagame" (BBC, 2018). How else can one explain that in 2020, after having been extremely critical of the Catholic Church in the past, Kagame praised the Church for "improving the wellbeing of Rwandans through education, health, and development" (Admin, 2020)? A Kagame quote that commonly made the rounds in 2018 was: "Seven hundred churches in Kigali? Are these boreholes that give people water? I don't think we have as many boreholes. Do we even have as many factories? But 700 churches, which you even had to close? This has been a mess!" (Himbara, 2018). In 2017, 700 official and unofficial churches and 100 mosques were shuttered "'for failing to comply with health, safety, and noise regulations,' and a law passed by parliament on July 27, 2018 'prohibits fasting for extended periods of time and requires that pastors earn a theological degree from an accredited institution'" (Ssuuna, 2018). The regulations are ostensibly meant to ensure the safety and protection of parishioners from unstable and unsanitary buildings as well as from charlatans posing as ministers for monetary gain from tithes. However:

For government critics, the 2018 crackdown on the churches revealed RPF anxieties about its own grip on power. David Himbara, once Kagame's economic adviser and now based in exile in Canada, did not mince words, writing that "the real reason Kagame shut down Rwandan churches is fear and paranoia". In a context wherein the media and political life are highly controlled, Himbara pointed out that churches can be understood as "the last open space" where hope and the possibility of change and a better future can be imagined. This is what was so dangerous. (Grant, 2020, p. 179)

One of these articulated better futures seems to be what Andrea Mariko Grant (2020) is referring to when she writes that "Pentecostalism provides an alternative: an alternative source of meaning and authority, an alternative kind of citizenship that privileges accountability not to the secular state but rather to God" (p. 168–169).

The RPF's attempt to sustain a unity narrative that eschews ethnic difference based on a reconstituted past of shared Rwandan ancestry "are further motivated by the central role history plays in the life of the ordinary Rwandan. Since history is subjective, the telling or recording of historical narratives cannot be considered as a simple cataloguing of dates and events. Rather it is the telling of personal stories with deep, inherent meaning imbedded in every account" However, "in societies with poor formal education and knowledge transmission, such as Rwanda, collective memory, expressed in day-to-day encounters and oral history, is of greater significance than official history" (Buckley-Zistel, 2009, p. 133, quoted in DeZalia, 2006, p. 159). The simple rewriting of history from the top does not erase years of accumulated history in the hearts and minds of individuals and communities. In order for true change to come about, the new version must successfully replace the former in the personal narratives of the people and not simply control public discourse (Buckley-Zistel, 2009, p. 133). As indicated earlier, "[f]or Halbwachs, there is a symmetry between the passage from personal to collective memory and that from collective memory to history" (Stroumsa, 2016, p. 333). In the Rwandan case, it appears that the Kagame regime is inverting this symmetry — revising history as a basis for a collective memory manifest in cultural memory with the aim of collective memory eventually replacing personal memory, and inversion that may point to a fragility in the process. In addition to the top-down strategy of memorials and dance performances, the government is utilising a bottom-up strategy of infiltrating day-to-day, intimate space, one of which is the church. Quoting Susan Thomson, Kerstin Bree Carlson recounts that "the PRF [sic] has created a precarious peace, one that has consolidated its power and authority at the expense of other ways of imagining Rwanda's shared future and developing its people" (Thomson, 2018, p. 13, quoted in Carlson, 2021, p. 57). If the government strategy of preserving the polity by perpetuating a constructed mythical, golden period in Rwandan history that is reinforced by Assmann's notion of *stable objects*, it is not surprising that Kagame views historical religions as competitors and seeks to eliminate them; yet he also understands the longstanding and influential role that churches have played in Rwandan life. Kagame has not hidden his suspicion of churches, and the accreditation requirement is an inroad to perpetuating the government's account of the nation's narrative from the pulpit.

Conclusion

The RPF's schema of history to collective memory to personal memory is the inverse of Assmann's memory-making schema and may gesture toward the instability of the government's tactics. A more provocative claim that will not be developed here but that is worth mentioning and also a sign of the precarity of the regime's approach is that Kagame's strategy is itself a kind of rival religion in "invisible form," following a line of reasoning cultivated by Danièle Hervieu-Léger as summarised by Huber Knoblauch (2001):

In the tradition of authors such as Peter Berger, Francois-André Lèvi-Strauss, and particularly Thomas Luckmann, she holds that such a definition should not be limited to recognized religion but also include more "invisible forms". In order to avoid the inflation of analogical interpretations of phenomena as religious, she links the notion of religion to the category of believing. Religion is a form of believing that is committed to a chain of belief. In believing, the individual becomes a member of a community and its tradition. Religion, then, includes three elements: the expression of believing, the memory of continuity, and the legitimizing reference to an authorized version of such memory (a notion that is borrowed from Maurice Halbwachs)." (p. 527)

Jan Assmann (2006), too, relies on Luckmann when he writes:

[Invisible religion] exists within a given culture as a higher and ultimately validating framework of meaning for the different fields of cultural practice, communication, and reflection that have emerged as distinct forms within this framework or "world picture" to which this "visible religion" [historical traditions] belongs as one field among others specific to this culture. (p. 32)

Further, one of Assmann's observations about ancient Egypt elegantly explicates why Rwanda's dance performances and memorials are so elemental to upholding the Kagame regime's revisionist past of Rwandan unity in service to reconciliation. If these performances and memorials are construed as having "the purpose of bringing to life and stabilizing a collective identity through symbolic dramatization," then they are crucial to "introducing into the present something distant and alien [a counterfactual or revisionist history that has] to be ritually imagined at regular intervals in order to maintain a context that is threatened by disintegration and oblivion [via narratives and memories that contradict official accounts]" (Assmann, 2006, p. 16). More modestly, the perpetuation of a *pure memory of an ancient past* that is not merely resuscitated but innovated is an essential element of religions and acts a heuristic for examining the Kagame regime's strategy of painting a pre-colonial, peaceful co-existence of Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa with a common ancestry in service to promoting reconciliation in post-genocide Rwanda.

As Rwanda is a religious nation, Kagame cannot entirely abandon religion, so he uses it to his advantage as an invisible religion whilst his authoritarianism is threatened by the influence of visible or historical, traditional religions in the country — most specifically, Christianity. The idyllic memories of returnees, which are embedded in objects of cultural memory, such as memorials and dance, are integral to maintaining the official narrative and the successful internalisation of this narrative depends on penetrating day-to-day, private spaces, which are characteristic of churches. This is accomplished not by the wholesale elimination of churches but through the transference of official discursive practices to discursive church practices, which the legislative requirement that all pastors secure a theology degree from a government approved school facilitates. Yet, this government approach of infiltrating religious spaces and closing others occludes the capacity for visible religion to robustly aid in managing group trauma. As Pargament (2011) compellingly argues based on a survey of scholarship on religion, it "adds a distinctive dimension to the coping process [...] Overall, it has become clear that religion is an integral, rich, and multidimensional part of the coping process, one that should not be overlooked" (p. 269).

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